

THE SARAKATSANIKO SHEEP

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Sarakatsans are Greek nomads originated from ancient Greek tribes and having preserved the same way of living from then until the ends of 1940s. Their main activity was the nomadic livestock farming, with the whole family following the flocks. For the Sarakatsans the nomadic livestock farming was more a way of living than a production system. Due to this particular way of living and livestock farming, they formed and maintained one of the most primary breeds, the Sarakatsaniko sheep breed.

The Sarakatsaniko sheep is an indigenous Greek breed that belongs in the group of mountainous breeds of sheep (type “zackel”). It has small size (with height, about 57-60 cm for the ewes and 63-68 cm for the rams), with short and thin tail (about 25 cm), which is also considered as one of the characteristics of the breed. The live weight of an adult ewe is on average 35 Kg and of the lambs and rams 25 Kg and 66 Kg, respectively. The wool type is coarse, long and thick (up to 26 cm) with average weight 2.5 kg (maximum 3.5 kg). It covers almost the whole body, while its colour varies from completely white to completely black, with different proportions of each coloration. Milk yield per lactation is about 40 Kg, with fat content about 6.5-7%. It is a vital and energetic animal, with low prolificacy (1- 1.2) and adapted in harsh environments. It shows high resistance in diseases and has not special feeding requirements. It has a highly developed feeling of being in a flock.

The breed was widespread in the entire Balkan region. Sarakatsaniko sheep in the beginning of the previous century were about 2.500.000 heads, while today in Greece exist only four flocks with a total number of animals about 1.000. A flock with 200 heads is in the village Nea Santa in Sappes (Rodopi), while in the same village exists a mixed flock of 400 animals, with about 100 heads of Sarakatsaniko sheep. The third flock is located in the nearby village Strofi of about 600 heads and the fourth in Kechro with about 100 animals.

In Bulgaria the number of Sarakatsaniko sheep (Karakachan) is about 200 heads, which are spread all over the country in mixed flocks, while in F.Y.R.O.M. a

small number is found with the name Karakachanska that is considered as a brand of the local breed Pramenka. In Turkey a small number of Sarakatsaniko sheep is found, called Karakaçan.

Sarakatsaniko sheep, as already mentioned, one of the oldest sheep breeds in Europe is a part of the cultural heritage of the entire Balkan region. It is a vital animal with high adaptability in harsh environment, resistance to diseases and with not special feeding requirements. However, nowadays the breed is under the danger of extinction. It deserves to start an effort for the conservation of the breed and investigate its specific characteristics (immunology, feeding, adaptability, etc.). Up to today there is not a complete study of the demographic and phylogenetic evolution of the Sarakatsaniko sheep in the entire Balkan region.